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ABSTRACT

The current status of social studies education provides information for assessing and predicting future trends in social studies education. A 3-year study, "Social Studies Priorities and Needs," found that: social studies/social science educators are concerned with constructing a rationale and definition of social studies; the dominant approach to teaching social studies is "conservative cultural continuity"; the dominant pattern of social studies programs remains virtually unchanged from 60 years ago; the individual teacher is the key to the learning process although little is known about how to use this proposition to improve education; teachers of elementary and secondary social studies are too preoccupied with administration and management to contemplate the goals of their activities; and teachers are most concerned about their students' poor reading ability and their apathy toward school. Based on these findings, four possible alternative views of the future of social studies education are suggested. One, that the inertia of the past will prevail, derives from the fact that despite the great changes which have occurred in social knowledge, the current pattern for social studies education has changed little since 1916. View 2, that education will move toward agreed-upon ideal states, is based on other changes in education, e.g. racial and sexual equity. View 3 proposes that the legacy of new ideas developed by the "New Social Studies" will be rediscovered during more favorable times. Finally, view 4 suggests that computers have the capacity to revolutionize the entire educational organization. (KC)

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FOUR FUTURES FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

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Presented to
RETHINKING SOCIAL EDUCATION: A NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

August 16, 1982
Wingspread Conference Center
Racine, Wisconsin

My thoughts about the theme of this conference have been influenced primarily by a three-year study of the past, present, and future of social studies/social science education recently completed by SSEC, viewed against the background of the SSEC since its founding.

The Social Science Education Consortium was founded in 1963, at a time when unprecedented resources were being mobilized for educational change and improvement in the United States. Stringent criticisms of the state of education had stunned educators in the 1950s, as did the launching of Sputnik in 1959. A prominent part of President Johnson's Great Society was greatly increased federal support for education, setting and supporting new goals of equity in and access to educational opportunities and encouraging experimentation in both subject matter and educational methodology.

While the initial force of this new surge of interest in educational improvement was focused on mathematics and natural science, to "catch up with the Russians," the broadening social concerns of the Great Society soon extended the thrust of educational improvement into the social sciences and social studies. The Cooperative Research Program of the U.S. Office of Education funded many research and curriculum projects, including a dozen or more under "Project Social Studies." The National Science Foundation, after careful consideration, decided that "science" encompasses the social sciences; its education directorate supported a great variety of educational research and training activities and funded major curriculum development projects in sociology, anthropology, geography, psychology, and political science, as well as many lesser projects.

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The major reason for the formation of SSEC in 1963 was to monitor emerging developments in social studies and social science education, to facilitate communication among educators and social scientists on the cutting edge of education, and to disseminate information about the new developments. Throughout the nineteen years of its existence, the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information about developments in social studies/social science education has been the major focus of SSEC, with sponsorship of the ERIC clearinghouse an integral part of these activities from 1971 to the present. A landmark event in this 19-year history is the recent completion by SSEC of a three-year study of "Social Studies Priorities and Needs," with the acronym SPAN.

In the absence of a reliable crystal ball, the best preparation for developing sensitivity to emerging trends for making likely projections of the future is an intimate acquaintance with the past and with the current status of one's field of expertise. The first publication of Project SPAN was a 200-page history of social studies reform from 1880 to 1980--a story of growth, committees and commissions, creativity, conservatism, hope, frustration, and numerous reinventions of the wheel. This history contributes much to an understanding of The Current State of Social Studies, SPAN's 300-page account of the rationales, goals, and objectives of social studies, of curriculum organization, curriculum materials, instructional practices, and the status of social studies teachers.

Among the findings reported in the SPAN work are the following:

--There is much confusion in the field about what a rationale is. The construction of a full and useful rationale for social studies is a very difficult task that has seldom been attempted.

--Currently, social studies/social science educators are greatly concerned about developing a definition of the social studies. Many of the definitions that have been put forth are statements of desirable goals or recommended procedures, rather than strict definitions.

--Three approaches to the teaching of social studies can be identified. "Conservative Cultural Continuity" is the dominant approach, with the "Process of Thinking Reflectively," "Intellectual Aspects of History and/or the Social Sciences," and variants of these as alternatives to the dominant approach. In practice, combinations of the various approaches are used.

--Citizenship education is the most common single goal for social studies; the most common goal set is knowledge, skills, attitudes or values, and social participation.

--The dominant pattern of social studies programs from kindergarten through grade 12--despite numerous variations that have occurred--is one that was established more than 60 years ago. The typical K-6 pattern is built on the "expanding environments" theme, while the curriculum in grades 7-12 consists of a pattern of U.S. history, world history, civics, and government. This dominant pattern has persisted due to the strength of tradition, the reinforcement of the pattern by textbook content, and the lack of a compelling alternative. There is little articulation or coordination of social studies programs between grade levels, particularly between the elementary and secondary grades.

--Students, teachers, administrators, and the public accept and rely on curriculum materials as essential aids to teaching, learning, and classroom management. Foremost among curriculum materials are textbooks, which are used in the great majority of classrooms. Compared to textbooks, supplementary materials including films, filmstrips, workbooks, and teacher-developed materials (other than tests) have slight use.

--Most competing texts for particular subjects and grade levels are very much alike in format, style, and content. The texts typically stress the transmission of information and avoid sensitive subjects. Some notable changes have occurred in textbooks in the past 20 years, particularly in the treatment of women and minorities and in the use of color and graphics. Changes in the amount of attention given to controversial topics and to variety in learning activities have been less extensive.

--The individual teacher is the "key" in the learning process, but little is known about why this is true or how this proposition can be used to improve social studies/social science education.

--Teachers of elementary and secondary social studies, unlike their college-level counterparts, spend little time contemplating the goals of their activities; they are too preoccupied with problems of administration and management. Where common goals can be found, they are transmission of textbook knowledge to students and socialization, in the sense of instilling acceptable classroom and school behavior, getting acceptance of the norms and values of society, and, to a lesser extent, preparing students for successful participation in mainstream society.

--Teachers' most commonly perceived problems are students' poor reading ability and their apathy toward school. Other problems that concern teachers are lack of time to teach their subject, lack of materials and equipment, and lack of good sources of information about new methods and materials.

--Teachers teach the same subject in diverse ways, even when using the same textbook in the same school system. Unfortunately, less information is available on the varieties of teaching methods than on central tendencies in teaching methods.

--Most instruction in elementary and secondary schools takes place in large groups. Much teacher time is spent on administrative duties and the maintenance of discipline. Preparation time is generally considered to be inadequate, and the students' time on task in the classroom is substantially less than 100 percent. Most of the time students and teachers spend in the classroom is focused on the use of curriculum materials. Lecturing or teacher talk is the most common mode of instruction, increasing in importance from the lower to higher grades.

These insights into the current state of social studies certainly give no definitive direction for predictions of the future, but should provide useful background information for assessing both the prospects and the desirability of various possible futures.

There are four views that one might take of the future of social studies/social science education. They are presented here as alternatives, but the hopeful futurist must be sensitive to all four.

View #1: The Inertia of the Past Will Prevail

The educational literature, including that of the social studies, is replete with accounts of reforms that failed. Most educational changes, however exciting and productive, depend upon the charisma and enthusiasm of one or a few individuals, who eventually get tired, move away, retire, or die. A support system to nurture the innovative individual and then to extend the innovation is necessary but seldom exists. Support systems--at the school, district, board, state, or national levels--exist to preserve the system, not to change it. Professional jealousies inhibit the adoption of someone else's innovation; a teacher is too proud to borrow from the

room next door; new directors of federal agencies must invent new thrusts, to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. The energies of innovation, in toto weak at best, cancel each other out.

In social studies, one reform movement after another has rediscovered the good ideas of previous movements, added a little on its own, had limited success in influencing the system, and faded into obscurity. The greatest effort of all, the "new social studies," which flourished from the early 1960s into the early or middle 1970s, receiving unprecedented financing from public and private sources, has now had its epitaph written and rewritten many times.

The one notable success of an educational reform effort in the social studies tends to support the thesis that inertia will prevail, rather than that reform is possible. The National Education Association's Commission on the Social Studies produced a report in 1916 which recommended a pattern of subjects and courses for social studies for grades 7-12. Another report, from a similar source, recommended a K-6 sequence compatible with the 7-12 recommendation. While the magnitude of the break with the past represented by these reports has sometimes been exaggerated, it is true that they had a substantial impact on the growing educational establishment, such that these recommendations were substantially in place throughout the country by the mid-20s. Voila! Change is possible! But is it? This pattern has remained in place, with minor deviations, to the present time, despite the great changes that have occurred in social knowledge and the needs of students and society.

As with many areas of great inertia and/or ignorance and/or uncertainty, a good case can be made that the best prediction of where education will be next year, five years from now, and possibly ten, twenty, or fifty years from now, is that it will be pretty close to where it is now.

View #2: Education Will Move, Slowly But Surely--and Maybe Not So Slowly--Toward Agreed-Upon Ideal States

Educators have a great deal of knowledge about education that is not now being used, and there is substantial agreement on much of this knowledge. Students should be more actively involved in their education--doing more, listening less. Students of the same age have very different levels of ability and readiness; more individualization could make learning more

efficient and more effective. Students have very different learning styles, with respect to pacing and timing and different sensory perceptions; again, individualization and variety in teaching methods are the known route to more effective learning. A decrease in rote learning and an increase in problem-solving facility will better prepare students for their future. Smaller schools contribute to a sense of mutual support between and among students, teacher, and administrators. The traditional content of textbooks, more in social studies than in others, needs to be brought up to current levels of knowledge in the social sciences. Goals and objectives need to be elaborated, clarified, and more generally agreed upon--particularly in social studies. Teachers need more moral and logistic support, more preparation time, less paper work, more and better staff development opportunities. These and other recommendations for moving toward a desired state for social studies are elaborated in the SPAN report on The Future of Social Studies.

While many educators agree on the desirability of many such changes, many also think of them as pie in the sky. There is too much inertia in the system; there is too much disagreement on how to achieve such goals, if not on the goals themselves; and the clincher is, it all costs far more money than will be available in any forseeable future.

But the course of human development, since humans discovered the idea of progress a few centuries ago, has been remarkable. Whereas Socrates met death for his radical ideas, Copernicus was merely disgraced for disputing Ptolemy and Einstein was honored for upsetting Newton. While the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions were not nearly as rapid as political events from which they borrowed the concept of revolution, they were profound. In education, America moved in less than a century from education through high school for less than 10 percent of its citizens to about 90 percent. In only a few decades, the proportion of students experiencing postsecondary education moved from less than 20 percent to over 50 percent. In still less time, substantial progress has been made toward racial and sexual equity within our educational system.

Change is possible, it does occur, it often occurs in directions that many welcome as progress. It can also happen in education.

View #3: The New Social Studies is Not Dead, But Only Sleeping

The "new social studies" was part of a much wider movement of attempted social reform in the 1960s and 1970s. With respect to the organization and methods of education, many innovations were developed and tried: modular scheduling, open classrooms, team teaching, management by objectives, behavioral objectives, cross-age learning, games and simulations, activity packets, problem solving, and computer-assisted instruction.

Drawing upon these and other organizational and methodological innovations, many social studies educators and social scientists embarked upon a great number of programs to revise the curriculum, disseminate new methods and materials, and educate or reeducate teachers. Many new materials were developed in anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, geography, and history. The concepts and structures of the social science disciplines were drawn upon and in many cases were the principal fare. Other materials were interdisciplinary, emphasizing concepts and problems that cut across the established social science disciplines.

A few of the new materials were widely used in elementary and secondary schools, most received limited use, and some died in the pilot stage or in publishers' offices. Well before widespread dissemination could be expected or accomplished, national economic conditions, tightening school budgets, diminishing publishers' profits, and lack of apparent and immediate success blunted and then stopped the thrust of the new social studies--as was also the case with "the new math" and the "new science." As of 1982, little is heard of the innovations of the 1960s and 1970s.

An important and neglected aspect of the decline of the new social studies is the decrease in concern for many social aspects of education. An important part of the educational reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s was an increased concern for portraying greater realism about nature and society. Value-laden issues--war, sex, economics, environment, and race--were introduced into many of the new curriculum materials, mostly in social studies. They reflected much of the concern with social problems of the broader society. With the exception of continuing and moderately effective concern for racial and sexual equity with respect to education and employment, most of these social concerns have been put on the back burner along with the new social studies.

While many may feel that the innovations of the new social studies are safely, permanently--and possible deservedly--buried, another view holds that a tremendous legacy of new ideas for teaching methods and learning materials was accumulated and stored away in the 1960s and 1970s. This legacy may be a tremendous storehouse of knowledge, awaiting more favorable circumstances to be rediscovered, recalled, revised, and put into practice to help bring about a basic restructuring of an antiquated system that many feel falls far short of the results that should be obtained, given the tremendous amount of financial and human resources devoted to our educational system.

View #4: A Revolution Requires a Strong Catalyst; Computers May Be It

Except for the 1916 report of the National Education Association, the success of which may be attributable to special circumstances, none of the many efforts for change have had much impact on social studies in the schools. The potent "Beard Commission" of the 1930s, depression and war, the virulent attacks of the 1950s, the humanistic stories of educational tragedies of the 1960s, and the new social studies--all had relatively little impact. Perhaps it takes a very strong catalyst--perhaps a major earthquake--to shake education out of its rut.

Computers may be such a catalyst. The first reaction to such a proposition may be that computers are just another fad, perhaps with some very legitimate promise for educational improvement, but no more so than many of the other innovations which took on the characteristics of fads and died. Computer-assisted instruction was seen as a great innovation, but it died along with the other innovations of the 1960s and 1970s.

Maybe so. But it may also be that computers offer solutions to so many educational problems that basic and dramatic changes may occur through the use of computers. Individualized instruction, interactive learning, manipulative learning, visual learning, reduced paper work for teachers and administrators, and access to tremendous banks of data and programs offer prospects for unprecedented changes in teaching and learning methods and the organization of educational institutions. Among these dramatic prospects, not the least is the phenomenal decline in the cost of access to computer capabilities. Cost has been the reason--sometimes the excuse--for not adopting many other innovations. The bottom of the computer cost curve is not yet in sight.

Like most views of the future, my own view is a combination of cold prognostication and warm desire. The prospects that I see for the near and intermediate future for social studies, with deliberately unspecified proportions of prediction and desire, are these.

1. A renewal of interest in a variety of social studies methods and materials--a reversal of the recent trend toward hardback, traditional texts,

2. A renewal of interest in broader social concerns, within and outside the educational system, related to a more realistic and more humane view of society and the world, and

3. A revolution in the content, methodology, and organization of our educational enterprise, based on the computer.

Any one of these three movements could occur by itself and independently of the others. Another possibility is that all three would go forward together, in concert, mutually supportive. That could be very exciting.